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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a structured group intervention for increasing social justice awareness, knowledge, and advocacy skills with upper elementary, middle school, or junior high aged students. The paper presents the "Empowering Students for Social Justice" model and describes a general framework that includes goals and activities for an 8-week program. The paper outlines eight different group sessions, one for each week. Issues processed in the group revolved around oppression, prejudice, and racism social justice themes. (Author/BT)

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Empowering Students for Social Justice (ES²J): A Structured Group Approach

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Abstract

This paper presents a structured group intervention for increasing social justice awareness, knowledge, and advocacy skills with upper elementary, middle school, or junior high aged students. The Empowering Students for Social Justice model is presented. A general framework which includes goals and activities for an 8 week group are described. Issues processed in the group revolved around oppression, prejudice, and racism – social justice themes.

Empowering Students for Social Justice (ES²J): A Structured Group Approach

Social issues which once faced only adults in our society are now facing children and adolescents in our schools. In recent years, a few schools from Oregon, Mississippi, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Colorado have been elevated to national prominence due to violence related to peer relationships gone wrong. Reports based on these school violence incidents appear to have a common theme of students feeling ridiculed or unjustly treated by others. Social justice issues involve intense feelings of oppression, prejudice, and racism. School Counselors must utilize every resource available to increase students' awareness of social justice concerns. Students must recognize and be empowered to confront social injustices in a positive manner by becoming advocates for social justice.

Development of the Social Justice Structured Group

Psychoeducational groups consider both psychological and educational needs of group members. Group members of psychoeducational groups have the opportunity to engage in "interpersonal and personal skills and attitudes which the client or student can use to solve present and future psychological problems" (McWhirter, 1995, p. 28). Using this thought the social justice structured group falls within the guidance/psychoeducational group category of the Association for Specialists in Group Work classification system (ASGW, 1992). The process is to teach knowledge and skills related to social justice issues. The goal is to help adolescents increase coping and developmental skills to face social justice situations.

Group work as an effective process for change has been documented by various writers (Capuzzi & Gross, 1992; Fuhriman & Burlingame, 1994; Gazda, 1989; Yalom, I.D., 1985). Adolescent group treatment may have increased effectiveness due to strong peer group reference during this developmental period (Shapiro, Peltz, & Bernadett-Shapiro, 1998). Adolescents have the opportunity through group work to recognize the universality of their experience with their peers. The group work experience may be the first time some issues are discussed with their peers. The development of empathy can also be an important byproduct of the group experience. Through vicarious learning, adolescents may be able to participate in joint problem solving or share in others' successes. The group experience may provide an opportunity for catharsis of emotions for these adolescents. Acceptance and support from peers can be a powerful experience for participating group members. Shapiro, et al., (1998) stated the "overriding benefit [of group work] is in the amelioration of emotional conflicts, value discrepancies, and strong feelings of insecurity" p. 203. Adolescents who steadily improve as individuals or members of society by becoming more aware of their value systems during a group experiences may feel more empowered to face oppression, prejudice, and racism – social justice issues.

Empowering Students for Social Justice Model (ES²J)

The Empowering Students for Social Justice Model (ES²J) was developed to provide structured group or classroom guidance activities to help students increase in knowledge,

awareness and coping skills in relation to social justice issues within the school system. The ES²J group model provides activities for an eight week period. From the authors' experience in public schools, it was determined that social awareness and advocacy are life skills which must be socially constructed over a developmental time period. Thus the use of the ES²J model is not intended for a one time only activity. It is necessary to include issues that are developmentally appropriate surrounding social justice in all comprehensive developmental guidance programs. As the students developmental needs change, the activities, exposure to, and awareness of social injustices in society should increase. Students must be allowed the opportunities to be educated concerning social justices in their world. This can empower them to recognize, identify, and change the injustices as they begin to be advocates for social change in the 21st century.

The ES²J model is based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that students' perceptions of the world are a combination of three types of experiences which help them to form their thoughts of self and others by the time they enter into the school systems. These experiences are: 1) the students' shared universal experiences with all human beings; 2) the students' individual experiences as a separate entity from others; and 3) the students' cultural experiences related to their cultural backgrounds. The second assumption is that students at all ages will enter into the ES²J model with preconceived thoughts of oppression, prejudice, and racism. Some students may be very aware and feel they and their families are the victims of oppression, prejudice, and racism. Other students may be totally unaware that there are such things in the world.

The ES²J model begins with the school counselor following correct procedures in screening the group participants. A conceptual diagram of the ES²J model is provided in Appendix A. The students who are asked to volunteer for the ES²J group may be selected based on individual needs or exhibited behaviors which the school counselor feels would be benefitted from involvement in the group. School counselors are strongly encouraged to refer to the ASGW standards for group work to ensure use of appropriate procedures in conducting the group. Parents should be notified in writing concerning the beginning of the group and the subject to be discussed. Once group members are selected the group should begin with a pre-assessment of student opinions using the Student Social Attitude Scale. This scale will be re-administered at the end of the group to measure for change using a pre and post test analysis.

The ES²J model group activities are framed within the context of multicultural and diversity issues and are divided into three sections. The first section encompasses activities related to gaining knowledge of self and others in the various systems in which the student exists. This section reinforces student learning of definitions associated with social justice concerns. Students also explore some sociopolitical topics related to the major ethnic and diversity issues in the United States. The knowledge base is provided prior to the students moving on to the second section of the model.

The second section of the model is designed to increase the students' awareness of self and others. During this segment, the group of students will begin to explore and examine their community, school, classroom and other extracurricular groups for issues of social justice concern. Students will be monitored as they gain insight into multicultural and diversity experiences within each of the previously stated systems. Students will also be asked to consider how other individuals are encouraged or discouraged to become a part of each of these systems.

The third section of the ES²J model is to increase students' helping skills and build altruistic character by providing the opportunity for the group to help someone else or with a

specific social justice issue which may have emerged from section 2 of the group. This requires planning and involvement by the school counselor and school executive officer to offer the opportunity. Students should select and critically examine each project considered as a group before making a final determination. This task focus of the group, just prior to termination, can be a powerful learning tool for future social advocacy and should not be rushed by the school counselor. After the social justice project is completed, students should meet again as a group to debrief. The post assessment should be given at this time. Students should also be seen individually to discuss their own process or personal growth during the ES²J group.

Group Membership and Size

Considering the sensitivity with parents concerning some social justice issues, a small group of 5 to 6 members may be best for considering issues pertaining to more sensitive issues. These sensitive issues may vary depending upon community attitudes toward various groups. For example, a community who has historically exhibited oppression or prejudice toward African Americans may perceive discussing African American sociopolitical histories much differently than a community who historically has exhibited an openness to minority populations. This does not mean the school counselor should avoid opening students' awareness to African American sociopolitical history. However, it does mean the school counselor should proceed with care. Nothing will be gained if the battle for social justice is lost before it has begun. Start slowly with an less controversial oppressed population, such as Southern European White Ethnics.

A large group or classroom guidance experience can utilize the ES²J model by selecting broad social justice issues in the beginning. Films from the Southern Poverty Law Center or other social change institutions can aid in the processing of social concerns. The large group may need to be broken into small groups after major presentations to allow participation by all students in discussion and processing.

Group Format

The ES²J group format should generally be confined to 50 minute periods. If videos are utilized in the group, the time may be extended to allow for debriefing which is very important with social justice awareness activities. The first session may require more opening time due to getting acquainted activities, statements of group purpose, defining goals, and discussing expectations. After the first session, opening time should take about 10 minutes. The working time in the group should normally be about 30 minutes. Leaving 10 minutes for processing time which summarizes the session and introduces homework for the next session. The first session is called "Beginnings" and focuses on building a safe environment for students to explore social justice issues. The next 2 sessions are "Knowledge" sessions. These sessions allow students the opportunity to gain knowledge about social justice issues (i.e., multicultural and diversity issues). In Sessions 4 and 5 students are exposed to sociopolitical histories of groups who have faced oppression, prejudice, and racism. Between sessions 5 and 6 it is encouraged to have the group become involved in taking some form of social justice action. This project should be discussed and decided upon by consensus in the group. The project can be a social project in the school or community and will be called Session 6. Session 7 should be a processing of the social justice project. The last, 8, session is called "Endings" and the focus is on terminating the group and processing learning and growth that occurred during the group experience.

Session Content

Structure for each group meeting is presented in this section of the paper. Goals, objectives, and activities are outlined for each session. Materials needed for each session are also mentioned in the activities narratives.

Session 1: Beginnings

Goals

Goals for session 1 are to: 1) provide the opportunity for students to get acquainted, 2) set ground rules for feeling safe in the group, 3) gain an understanding of the purpose and general expectations for the group, 4) gain an understanding of confidentiality and its limits in the group process, 5) clarify concepts of thinking, feeling, and behaving in the context of the group, and 6) introduce the concept of social justice.

Activities

Welcome each of the group members. Have each group member introduce themselves. When everyone has been introduced, discuss the name, purpose, and major goals of the group. Follow with a get acquainted exercise: a large sheet of colorful paper is given to each group member. The group member will fold the paper once horizontally, and once vertically. Group members, while holding the center folded point of the paper, will cut a diagonal curve from one open corner to the opposite open corner on the open side of the paper. When the paper is unfolded a cloudlike shape should emerge. Have an open discussion first related to the word empowerment. Use the "cloudlike" papers to record group members' definition of empowerment. After group members read their definitions of empowerment, set them aside. Next discuss a definition for social justice as a group. Be aware that students sometimes have a better concept of what social justice is not or "social injustice". Allow students to write their thoughts and experiences of social justice issues on a long sheet of newsprint which has been prepared ahead of time and affixed to the wall or chalkboard. Students should be allowed to write as many thoughts related to social justice or injustice as they choose. When all students are finished, students should read from the paper on the wall. Students should then divide into dyads and discuss their definitions of empowerment and their thoughts on social justice. The dyads should discuss how social justice issues impact their school and community. Students should take empowerment "clouds" and affix them near or above the social justice thought or issue they would like to learn more about or work to improve. Process the thoughts, feelings, and actions used to make the decision on where they placed their empowerment "clouds".

Expectation of group leaders and members should be discussed. These expectations should include but are not limited to such issues as attendance, active participation, completion of homework assignments, respect for others' thoughts and feelings, and evaluation of the group. Group members may wish to introduce other expectations to be discussed by the group.

Session 2: Knowledge of Multicultural Population Groups

Goals

Goals for session 2 are to: 1) increase knowledge concerning 6 major cultural groups in the United States (African American, Asian American, Latino(a)s, Native American, White Ethnic, and Biracial Individuals), 2) understand the various names particular members of each cultural group may prefer, 3) develop an understanding that each major cultural category is comprised of several subgroups, 4) define and explore racism, oppression, and prejudice, 5)

increase open communication concerning talking about multicultural groups and social justice issues, and 6) examine social justice values in a safe environment with peers.

Activities

Opening Time (approximately 10 minutes): Allow students the opportunity to discuss social justice issues or concerns they may have noticed since the first session. Working Time (approximately 30 minutes): Introduce 6 major cultural groups by writing them horizontally across the top of a large sheet of paper affixed to the wall. Be certain to leave room for a vertical column to put diversity groups in during session 3. Have students discuss each population group and various subgroups. The Biracial category may require further explanation for students. Be prepared to define this group as individuals who belong to two or more of the major cultural groups and identify as such. Process possible social justice issues the population groups may have experienced (keep this discussion short because further discussion will occur in sessions 4 and 5). Allow time for group members to discuss their experiences with friends or families from the various cultural groups. The school counselor should recognize international populations are not covered by these categories and may wish to add a column called "International or Immigrant." Group members should process definitions for oppression, prejudice, and racism by consulting books or dictionaries provided by the school counselor. An open discussion of possible situations in the school or community the students may have witnessed could be processed at this time. The group leader should reiterate group rules concerning confidentiality, safety, and respect. Processing Time (approximately 10 minutes): this time should be used to summarize the discussion and group process during this session. Homework assignment for the group: have each group member monitor media (television, radio, cinema, newspapers, etc.) for specific instances related to one or more of the 6 major cultural groups.

Session 3: Knowledge of Diversity Population Groups

Goals

Goals for session 3 are to: 1) increase knowledge concerning diversity in the United States (Age, Disability, Religion, Socioeconomic, Sexual Orientation, Gender); 2) develop an understanding that each diversity category is comprised of members from the various cultural groups; 3) define and explore oppression and prejudice in relation to diverse populations in the school and community; 5) increase open communication concerning talking about diverse populations and social justice issues; and 6) examine social justice values in a safe environment with peers.

Activities

Begin session 3 with opening time (approximately 10 minutes): have students discuss their thoughts, feeling, or behaviors related to social justice since the previous session and their findings from the homework assignment. Working time (approximately 30 minutes): the group leader should have prepared colorful sheets of paper in which diversity population groups (age, disability, religion, socioeconomic, sexual orientation, gender) have been named (one per sheet). The group leader should have the sheets of papers scattered on the floor in the middle of the group member circle. A koosh ball should be given to one group member. Instruct the group member to toss the ball gently into the middle of the group so that it lands on one of the sheets of paper. The group should then discuss how this diverse population has experienced oppression and prejudice within the United States. The group members should include process how each diversity category is comprised of members from the various cultural groups. If they do not, it may be necessary for the facilitator to further this understanding. After the diverse population groups

have been explored, group members should be asked to explore how these groups may be treated in their school or community. Processing time (approximately 10 minutes): summarize the discussion and group process during this session. Homework assignment for the group: have each group member monitor media (television, radio, cinema, newspapers, etc.) for specific instances related to one or more of the diverse population groups discussed.

Session 4: Awareness of Sociopolitical Histories

Goals

Goals for session 4 are to: 1) increase awareness of the sociopolitical histories of 6 major cultural groups in the United States; 2) increase awareness of particular contributions by each cultural group to the present day United States; 3) increase awareness concerning social justice issues in an historical context and how they have changed or remained the same over time; 4) process group members' experiences within the school or community with social justice situations which were positive or negative; 5) brainstorm possible ways to help change negative experiences into positive experiences in the school or community for cultural populations.

Activities

Opening time (approximately 10 minutes): Use to discuss homework from the session three and any thoughts, feelings, or behaviors related to social justice.Working time (approximately 30 minutes): The group leader should have video clips from films related to social justice awareness. Films such as the "Shadow of Hate" or "Journey to a Hate Free Millennium" could be used. Time constraints may exist with the use of an entire video. Clips may convey the thoughts. An alternative is to have the group leader read quotes from autobiographies for each of the groups. This session has as the primary goal to increase group member awareness of oppression, prejudice and racism imposed on multicultural group members. A discussion should also follow recognizing the contributions to society by each of the multicultural groups. If the counselor is not knowledgeable, preliminary preparation should be conducted prior to the session meeting. Students may have been exposed to some social injustices through textbooks and the media. It is the school counselors' responsibility to help group members' filter through the myths presented as historical truth. Students should place events and situations on a newsprint time line affixed to the wall. After this process is completed, a discussion concerning how group members' experiences within the school or community with social justice situations which were positive or negative should be initiated by the group leader. Processing time (approximately 10 minutes): This discussion should end with brainstorming possible ways to help change negative experiences into positive experiences in the school or community for cultural populations. Homework assignment: group members' are asked to continue brainstorming on their own and write down the possibilities they consider.

Session 5: Awareness of Sociopolitical Histories

Goals

Goals for session 5 are to: 1) increase awareness of the sociopolitical histories of diverse groups in the United States; 2) increase awareness of particular contributions by each diverse group to the present day United States; 3) increase awareness concerning social justice issues in an historical context and how they have changed or remained the same over time; 4) process group members' experiences within the school or community with social justice situations which were positive or negative; 5) brainstorm possible ways to help change negative experiences into positive experiences in the school or community for diverse populations.

Activities

Opening time (approximately 10 minutes): Use to discuss homework from session four and any thoughts, feelings, or behaviors related to social justice. Working time (approximately 30 minutes): The group leader should have prepared media clips or readings that convey how members of diverse population groups have been historically treated in the United States. Gender is a good starting point. This session has as the primary goal to increase group member awareness of oppression, prejudice and racism imposed upon diverse population group members. A discussion should also follow recognizing the contributions to society by diverse population groups. If the counselor is not knowledgeable, preliminary preparation should be conducted prior to the session meeting. Students may have been exposed to some social injustices through textbooks and the media. It is the school counselors' responsibility to help group members' filter through the myths presented as historical truth. The same time line used for session 4 is again placed on the wall. In this session, photographs of various diverse population members (preferably media figures who do not present stereotypical aspects of the diverse groups) should be placed on the time line. Upon completion of this process, a discussion concerning how group members' experiences within the school or community with social justice situations which were positive or negative should be initiated by the group leader. Processing time (approximately 10 minutes): This discussion should end with brainstorming possible ways to help change negative experiences into positive experiences in the school or community for diverse populations. Homework assignment: group members' are asked to continue brainstorming on their own and write down the possibilities they consider.

Extra Planning Session

This extra planning session is to bring the group members together to determine what they would like to choose as a social justice project. This project can be working with assisting a multicultural group or a diverse population group. Students will have ideas from the brainstorming sessions in sessions 4 and 5. They may confront social justice issues concerning socioeconomic status by helping serve food at a homeless shelter. They may want to volunteer as a group to help at a senior citizen center for a dance or other activity. The goal is to actively participate in a group consensus social justice project to increase feelings of altruism and personal empowerment. The group leader may need to seek out potential projects earlier than this meeting. This is an important dimension of the ES²J model. Session 6 will be actually doing the social justice project.

Session 6: Social Justice Project

Goals

Goals for session 6 are to: 1) create a sense of empowerment for students that they can make a difference; 2) instill a sense of altruism for helping others; 3) create a sense of togetherness and community for students while contributing to the school or community; 4) promote visible activity for addressing social justice concerns in the school and community; and 5) encourage a sense of self-responsibility in students for addressing social justice concerns in an appropriate manner.

Activities

Activities for this session will be determined during the extra planning session. Group members and the leader will participate in a social justice project within the school or community. This project will provide the material for discussion in session 7. During the social justice project, when appropriate, students should be discussing how they are contributing to upholding social

justice issues for all people. They should be praised by adults involved in the project for being willing to empower themselves to be a part of the social justice project. Adult role models are very important in the interaction of group members with others. The role models should be adequately prepared for the experience.

Session 7: Debriefing Social Justice Project

Goals

Goals for session 7 are to: 1) review the social service project; 2) discuss how acting in a manner to confront social justice impacted the students' sense of empowerment; 2) process altruism in the school and community; 3) synthesize the social service project with the students' own value systems and how they might have changed concerning specific population groups; 4) discuss possible future projects to become involved with as individuals or student groups; and 5) provide a discussion of internal and external rewards.

Activities

Opening time: Students should be allowed to initiate topics related to social justice. This discussing should be brief. Working time: Group members should each take a white sheet of paper (cut in the shape of a cloud) and write down three headings; 1) thoughts, 2) feelings, and 3) behaviors. The students' will independently write down what their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors were concerning the social justice project. Group members will attach the "cloudlike" shapes to a large rainbow that had been affixed to the wall by the group leader prior to the group meeting. A discussion of the "empowerment clouds" should follow. The group leader will introduce how rewards can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Group members will be presented with a rainbow sticker as a symbolic representation of their contributions to increasing social justice. Students should have the opportunity to debrief concerning the social justice project and how they feel they were impacted by it.

Session 8: Endings

Goals

Goals for session 8 are to: 1) examine major emotions and feelings experienced during the group and at the group coming to a close; 2) encourage personal empowerment and advocacy related to social justice issues; 3) recognize new learning that occurred during the group; 4) reinforce each individual's responsibility in encouraging social justice in the school, community, and world; and 5) recognize each group member's personal power in changing society.

Activities

Welcome everyone to the group. Ask group members to discuss ideas and thoughts that were brought up during the group's time together over the past 7 weeks. Move from thoughts to feelings. Have group members explore feelings they may have experienced during the group and how they feel others may have felt during the group process. Next encourage statements of personal empowerment and advocacy experienced during the group activities. Reinforce each individual's responsibility in encouraging social justice in their school, community, and world. Closing activity -- affirmation sticker shower: each group member is given a page of colorful business circle stickers. One student stands in the middle of the circle. Students are asked to write a positive word or statement encouraging advocacy for social justice on the circle for the student standing in the middle. Students then place the sticker on the standing student's shoulder or back. The student sits down and another student takes his/her place. The group leader should recognize each group member's personal power in changing society. Closing with an appropriate short video or voice recording that gives a sense of hope for society in relation to social justice may be done.

Conclusion

The structured psychoeducational group presented in this paper used the ES²J model for presenting materials. The session topics were given in a brief format. School counselors should be creative in preparing and conducting the social justice group. It is imperative that school counselors know their school systems and communities prior to conducting the group so that proper communication can occur between parents, teachers, administration, and students. Awareness is the key. Allowing adolescents the opportunity to discuss social justice issues in a group setting may be a social intervention that will prevent crimes based on social injustice motives. It is imperative these social injustices be removed from the educational institutions, we want our children to be safely and securely nurtured.

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Social Justice: The full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.[1]

Ableism: A pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional, and physical disabilities.[2]

Advocacy: The active participation of an individual or individuals in pleading for the principle or ideal of just dealing, right action, or fair treatment of others.

Ageism: The "aversion, hatred and prejudice toward the aged and their manifestation in the form of discrimination on the basis of age."[3]

Classism: Ranking individuals and families on the basis of, education, occupation, prestige, income, and the ability to accumulate wealth.[4] The institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socio-economic class; and an economic system which creates excessive inequality and causes basic human needs to go unmet.[5]

Disability: Physical or mental limitations...considered to be inadequate in meeting expected social and economic roles. These include: perceptual - such as visual or hearing impairments, learning disabilities; illness-related - such as multiple sclerosis, AIDS; physical - such as cerebral palsy; developmental - such as Down Syndrome; psychiatric - such as bi-polar, manic-depressive; mobility - such as paraplegia, quadriplegia; environmental - such as asthma, allergies.[6]

Diversity: Dissimilarities among groups and/or individuals based on differences of race, ethnicity, gender, class; language, religion, ability, or age.[7]

Equity: The accommodation of differences through fairness, equal access, and equal opportunity.

Ethnicity: the cultural uniqueness attributable to one's national origin, this includes language, customs, and traditions.[8]

Fairness: The ability to convey treatment in a manner that is marked by impartiality and honesty which is free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism.

Gender: Characteristics of femininity and masculinity that are determined by culture, not biology.[9]

Indigenous: Members of racial or ethnic populations whose ancestors originated from the county in which they were born.

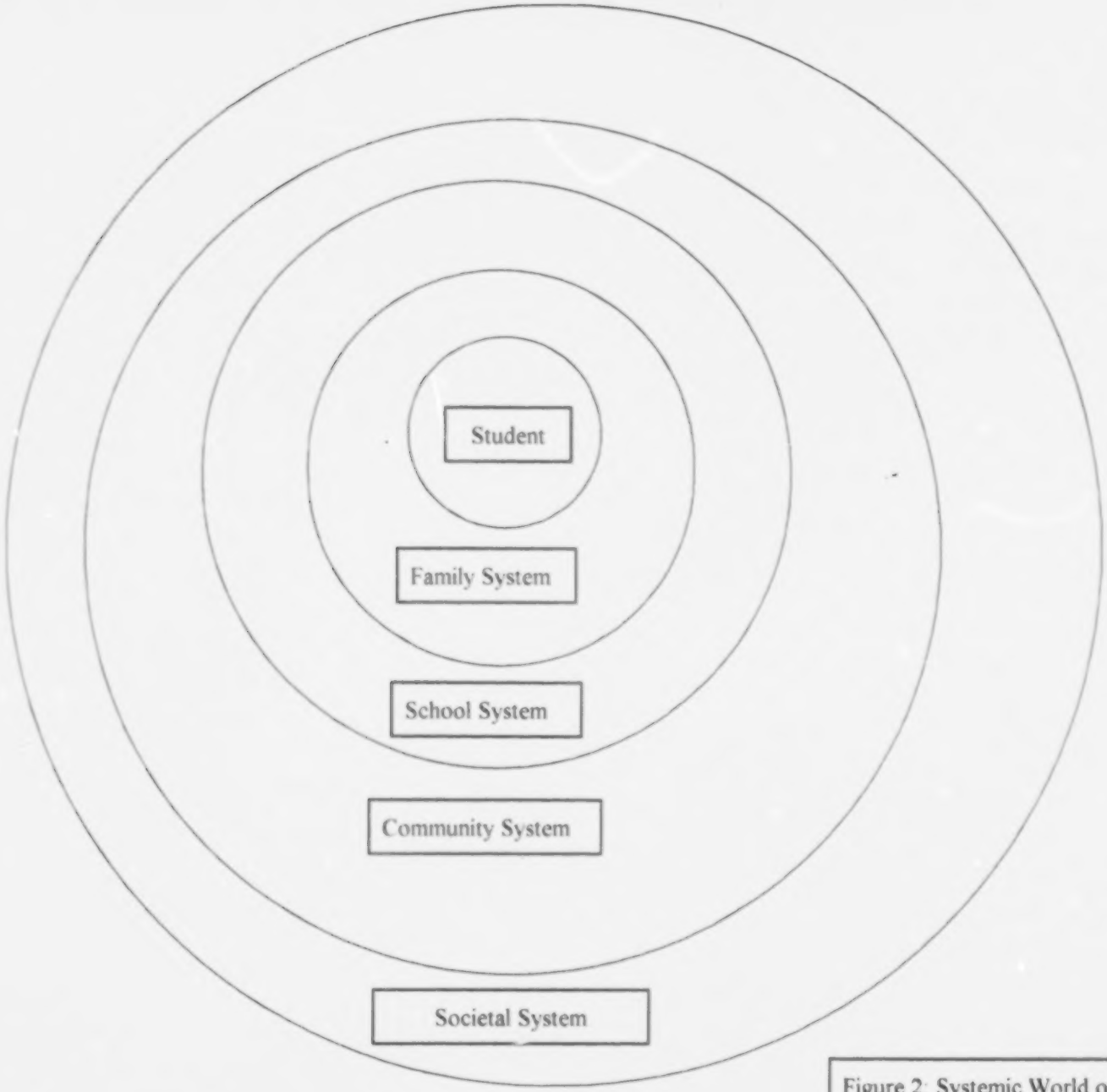

Figure 2: Systemic World of the Student

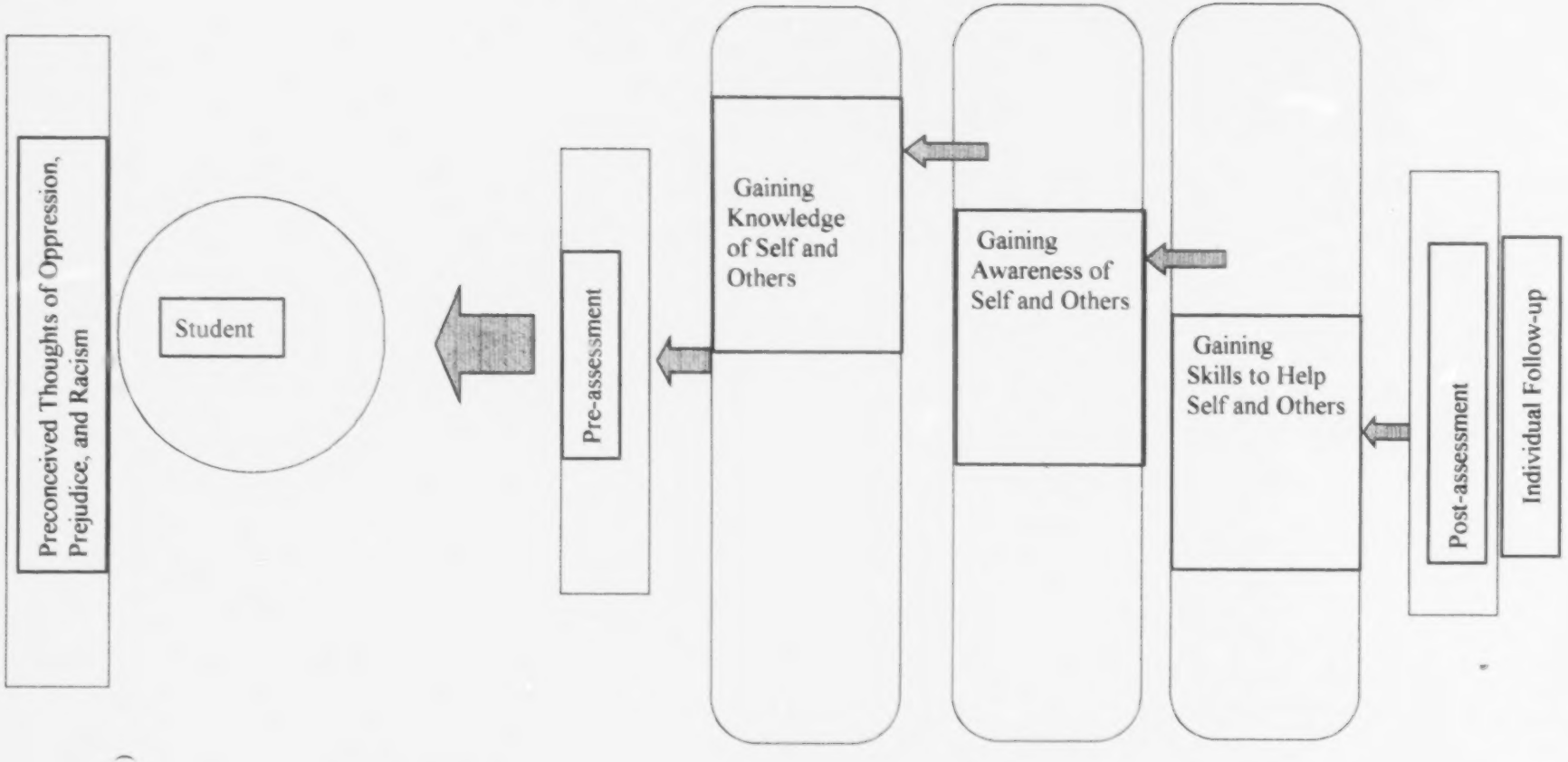

Figure 2: ES²J Model. Empowering Students for Social Justice. Portman, T. A. & Portman, G. L. (2000).

Appendix B (Cont.)